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SUBJECT: MANICALAND VISITORS SIGNAL POSSIBLE RESURGENCE OF
POLITICAL ENERGY IN 2006

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

11. (C) In separate meetings at the Embassy on December 19, the Mutare "bishops troika" and recently elected MDC Chairman for Manicaland Roy Bennett laid out for the Ambassador their separate efforts to rejuvenate "people power" in Zimbabwe, especially in Manicaland. The bishops said church leaders were planning to meet early in 2006 to discuss ways to energize the populace with an eye toward a possible "indaba"-style gathering on a new constitution. For his part, Bennett said the MDC provincial congresses underway were stimulating a genuine resurgence of grassroots energy that was loyal to neither MDC faction but that was setting the stage for renewed anti-regime activity next year. The message from both meetings was that Zimbabweans were eager to stand up to the regime given the right opportunity. End Summary.

Bishops: Possible "Indaba"; Need to Turn Out Numbers

12. (C) The three Mutare bishops, Trevor Manhanga (Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe) Patrick Mutume (Catholic Church) and Sebastian Bakare (Anglican Church), stressed that the new year would see a reinvigorated effort by the churches to create momentum against the regime. A principal opening in this regard was an approach to them before the Senate elections by ZANU-PF Party Chairman John Nkomo and Information Secretary Nathan Shamuyarira. According to the bishops, Nkomo and Shamuyarira asked them to articulate a proposal for bipartisan dialogue in the parliament to support a new constitution. After the senate elections and the opening of the MDC rift, the ZANU-PF "moderates" asked them to expand it beyond the parliament to a broader stakeholder "indaba", including strong GOZ critics such as Lovemore Madhuku's National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). The bishops were still deliberating on how to respond.

13. (C) The bishops acknowledged risks raised by the Ambassador that ZANU-PF would be in a position to manipulate such a diverse constitutional indaba to its own advantage. Nonetheless, they maintained that while ZANU-PF had cynically sought the "churches' vision" to exploit for its own purposes, the churches would exploit the offer to create their own momentum against the regime. The bishops said they intended next year to "get the people out in numbers" - numbers that the regime would have to respect.

14. (C) The bishops said that they intended to start by getting church leaders together in the new year to discuss a common constitutional agenda that was likely to revolve around social and economic issues at the center of Zimbabweans' concerns. They would consult with other democratic forces. For now, the MDC was absorbed by internecine struggles - the bishops said they consulted the previous week with MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai, who said the party would not be prepared for meaningful outside engagement until after the Party Congress in February. The bishops maintained that in any event, when the time came, churches and all other stakeholders would be driven by the imperative to limit executive power and assure that the country would "never, never again" experience the centralized autocracy of Mugabeism.

Transition Underway; Make Them Feel the Heat

15. (C) The bishops agreed with the Ambassador that a de facto political transition was already underway as people increasingly focused on the post-Mugabe era, and that the nation's economic implosion was a liability from which the ruling party could not escape. Everybody knew ZANU-PF had no plan; Zimbabweans - including many in the ruling party - were suffering and angry. Sanctions were useful in that they imposed "economic accountability" on those who otherwise enjoyed impunity. Moreover, the churches and others had

lists of the perpetrators of abuses who would one day have to be called to account - whether by a truth commission or any other number of options that might "give expression to people's anger." The malefactors had to be made to feel the heat; if they left the country before the accounting it would be a less satisfactory outcome but still better than having them remain politically active.

Bennett: MDC Democracy Reinvigorating Party,s Grass Roots

16. (C) In a subsequent meeting, Roy Bennett - energized by his election the previous weekend as MDC Chairman for Manicaland - offered the Ambassador an account of unexpected turns underway in the party's provincial congresses. According to Bennett, the party's grassroots were rejecting factionalism in the party and asserting themselves against the machinations of each faction's leaderships. In Manicaland, for example, assuming that many in the province were "pro-Senate", the Tsvangirai faction had dispatched National Chairman Isaac Matongo and "thugs" to browbeat and intimidate the membership into installing Tsvangirai's man.

17. (C) Bennett said the party membership had forcefully rejected Tsvangirai's candidate for provincial chair and instead elected him, as well as a provincial council that was loyal to neither MDC faction. Bennett said the membership in Manicaland didn't understand the senate debate and was appalled by the "Top Six's" inability to put party interests above personal concerns. They were further alienated by the machinations of each faction's leadership to manipulate or override the will of the masses to their advantage. Both factions were paying a price as the membership was standing up to each at party congresses. Bennett reported that similar episodes of grassroots independence had taken place at the Masvingo and Harare congresses, and he expected the remaining provinces to proceed likewise.

New Leadership?

18. (C) The impact of the membership's sense of "betrayal" on the party's future leadership was potentially profound, according to Bennett. A core of party leaders was emerging to give the party new direction behind the scenes. Among the like-minded figures who were reflecting and tapping into anti-factional sentiment, Bennett counted National Youth Chair and Information Secretary Nelson Chamisa, Economic Affairs Secretary Tendai Biti, Legal Affairs Secretary David Coltart, Foreign Affairs Secretary Moses Mzila-Ndlovu, and MP Abednigo Bhebhe.

19. (C) Bennett said most party luminaries recognized that Tsvangirai was their only chance in the next presidential

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elections and would have to remain atop the party for now. He would likely be re-elected President at the Party Congress for another five year term. Nonetheless, Biti was taking the lead in redrafting the party constitution to clarify the president's subordination to an enhanced and enlarged national executive. Bennett also noted quiet efforts by some (himself included) to bring into the party hierarchy respected civil society leaders, such as the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights' Arnold Tsunga and the Zimbabwe Election Support Network's Reginald Matchaba-Hove, which he maintained would enhance the party's capacity and stature. Bennett affirmed that he would back Tsvangirai for now but criticized him sharply for "listening to too many voices" and for surrounding himself with bad advisors, including those associated with violence.

Next Year the Year?

10. (C) Bennett emphasized how eager Zimbabweans were to confront the regime; all they lacked was organization and inspirational leadership. Bennett maintained that the party did not lack people to effectively mobilize the masses; he expected them to get to work soon after the party congress. The party would forcefully renew its outreach to churches and civil society. Bennett said his close contact with the people convinced him that ZANU-PF had already lost most of its traditional supporters; only those at the top of the patronage system remained on board - more out of fear than conviction. Importantly, the security forces were growing increasingly disaffected and the MDC was engaged in a "tricky and slow" process to reach out to key security elements. Bennett concluded that the democratic forces' mobilization of grassroots, ZANU-PF's loss of traditional constituencies, and the alienation of key security elements were ingredients that could topple Mugabe next year - via negotiation or otherwise.

11. (C) Bennett stressed the importance of continued international pressure to convince regime principals of the inevitability of change. He said he had worked quietly with elements of the South African Security Service to arrange an initial discreet bipartisan exchange at an international event at Gore Island earlier this year. Dumiso Dabengwa had shown up for ZANU-PF while MDC Deputy Secretary General Gift Chimankire had demurred at the last minute, evidencing his secret agenda against the MDC, Bennett maintained. While few

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if any ZANU-PF principals could be convinced to jump ship given the party culture and history, many sensed the end of days near and could be persuaded to come to the negotiating table. Bennett said the key circle around Mugabe included retired General Solomon Mujuru, retired General Vitalis Zvinavashe, Defense Minister Sydney Sekeramayi, Armed Forces Head Constable Chiwenga, Police Commissioner Augustine Chihuri, and Prisons Commissioner Paradzayi Zimonde - and even some of them might be ready to talk. The key was to keep the heat on them and leave them no other option. In this regard, Bennett characterized the Ambassador's Mutare speech as an important example for regime critics that ruling party bullies would stand down when stood up to.

Comment

12. (C) The Zimbabwean public has never been as economically desperate as it is now and the regime has never been as unpopular as it is now. Whether a constitutional indaba or rejuvenated MDC will prove to be springboards to meaningful change is uncertain, but the country's continued course into political and economic terra incognita promise to make the status quo here ever shakier in 2006.

DELL